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June 10, 1993

Art exhibit stirs up controversy

Some works depicting women's oppression are seen as explicit

By **JULIE MORRIS**
Staff Writer

Several paintings showing explicit images of female anatomy at the **Galeria Tonantzin** in San Juan Bautista are stirring up controversy among people walking by the show.

"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," is a collection of works by female artists from California, Washington and Nevada. The theme of the show, based on Maya Angelou's autobiography of the same title, is women's images of confinement and oppression, according to Jennifer Colby of the **Galeria Tonantzin**.

"It's a powerful theme," Colby said.

"The image of being caged but still being able to sing is a reality for many women. There is a process that women who have been abused must go through and that is going to come out in their artwork."

Colby noted that she and the

gallery's other three owners didn't know what to expect when they solicited works from other artists.

Many of the paintings show nude women in various sexual positions. One Watsonville artist, named Oma, painted exaggerated sexual organs in bold colors. Another painting, titled "Witness" by Megan Vafis of Chico, depicts a woman being raped by a man while a second woman watches.

When she received different paintings for the show, **Galeria Tonantzin** co-owner Valerie Egland said the owners decided to hang the more controversial pieces in less prominent places of the gallery, but onlookers still noticed.

Located in the Old Plaza Market shopping mall, the **Galeria Tonantzin** is a centrally located contemporary art gallery with a glass window for passers-by to peer into.

By Wednesday — three days after the show's opening — a guest book outside the door was filled with comments from people offended by the paintings.

Please see **EXHIBIT, A10**

Exhibit

• Continued from page A1

"Granted, some of the images are pretty vile," Egland said. "But these are things that happen to women. These paintings jerk the public's mind into that reality. I admit, it is controversial and not pleasant."

Comments in the guest book, most of them left unsigned, ranged from simply "This is disgusting" to longer protests.

"It is too bad to waste this nice book with opinions of such tasteless art. I am an art major and this art belongs in someone's closet," one observer said.

Another more upset observer said, "You really should keep your lesbian bestial fantasies in

your own witches coven."

Egland and Colby stressed that their intent is not to shock or offend the community.

"These are not our own works. It's someone else's work that we have chosen not to censor," Colby said.

In addition to the guest book comments, Egland said the landlords of the gallery's building told them they have received several phone calls from people complaining about the paintings.

"They were just expressing their opinion and I appreciate it," Egland said. "Our landlords were very supportive and cautious."

Egland and Colby said they do not plan on removing the paintings but will move them to

a place not visible from the gallery's window.

"It's a small community and it deserves respect," Egland said.

"I would feel bad if we offended the community — that's not what this is about. We want to attract viewers and if that means walking a fine line then that's what we'll do. We need to find that line and try not to cross it."

"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" will be on display at the **Galeria Tonantzin** until June 27. A reception for the artists will be held Saturday from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. Hours of the gallery are 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday and by appointment during the week.